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THURSDAY
OCTOBER 16, 2003



Three Americans dead in Gaza blast

A remote-controlled bomb tore apart an armored vehicle in a U.S. diplomatic convoy Wednesday, killing three American security guards.

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NATION

Supreme Court ponders if police should wait

The Supreme Court is debating just how long police must wait before breaking into

County awards RO plant bid

DeSoto commissioners still divided on utility issues

By JOHN LAWHORNE
STAFF WRITER

DESOTO COUNTY — The DeSoto County Commission remains divided on the best approach to establishing a county utilities system.

At Tuesday's board meeting, a request by the county administration's bid selection committee to award a \$2.22 million design/build

contract for two reverse osmosis (RO) water treatment plants provoked a disputatious exchange between proponents and opponents of the RO process.

Once again a utility issue was decided by a 3-2 vote, with three commissioners voting to accept the recommended bid and two against.

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★ BID

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The two proposed RO plants are part of DeSoto County's Phase One Water/Wastewater Project. One plant would be located at the planned Project Prairie (Wal-Mart Distribution Center) in South County. The other would be at the site of the former G. Pierce Wood Hospital. The two plants would treat deep well water to provide potable water for many county residents residing east of the Peace River.

Only two construction firms responded to the county's bid requests: UEM Inc. of West Palm Beach, and Cardinal Contractors of Sarasota.

County staff recommended Cardinal be chosen based upon the company's established construction record of RO plants in Southwest Florida. In addition, Cardinal had not requested an advance, had assured a Guaranteed Maximum Price with no exclusions, and had provided evidence of ability to bond the project.

Most of UEM's construction, the staff reported, had been outside of the U.S. UEM requested a 25-percent advance, submitted a Guaranteed Maximum

Price with a list of exclusions, and were unable to provide a performance bond.

DeSoto County Director of Utilities Vincent Akhimie told the board that plans call for the GPW plant to be completed by June 2004 and the Project Prairie plant by October 2004.

He said that Cardinal would be leading the design and construction team that would include Hartman & Associates, who have done engineering consulting work for DeSoto County under a continuing contract, and Harn RO Systems, a reverse osmosis plant contractor based in Venice.

Noting there were only two bidders on the project, Commissioner Bill Altman asked Mary Tucker, the county's purchasing officer, whose office handles bid solicitations, to review for the board the process for awarding the bids.

Tucker said the bid requests were advertised for about 30 days.

"We had approximately 15 companies that were interested and came to pick up packages, but upon receiving the bids, we only received two," Tucker said.

Commissioner Jerry Hill said he did not feel "real good" with the agenda item.

"It seems to me that it was

done in a fashion that's not proper and done right," Hill said. "Now, I'm not saying it's illegal. I'm just saying I think there were some things done here to enhance and give some advantage to the people with the high bid even though the low bid was fine."

He said the two bids should be thrown out and the project rebid. Tucker explained that the bid price had not been considered until the very end of the selection committee's review.

"The bid prices were not even opened until the selection committee had scored the company," she said. "Then we opened the bids and the price was based on 10 points. The selection committee did not even know the bid prices until the very end of the selection review."

Commissioner Felton Garner said that as far as he could tell the difference in the price bids were because the two bidders did not include the exact same services.

Altman said he had been invited by the selection committee to go over the bid process with them.

"As I sat there and listened to them, how they ranked and what they did, and they showed me, I am very convinced that

our staff has put together a fair and honest proposal for a bid that's legal," he said. Altman added he was convinced the committee had made the right selection.

Commissioner Ronald Neads had questions about the reverse osmosis process. He said the data he reviewed on reverse osmosis appeared to him to suggest a waste of water.

A staff adviser, Kurt Bayer, told Neads that as far as the discussion of the by-product being wasted, the preliminary design was based on an 85-percent recovery so that the amount of water that is wasted would be "substantially less" than what had been discussed. Part of the reverse osmosis process is that a portion of the water gets wasted as part of the RO process.

"But it also produces a much better quality finished product and is more dependable," Bayer said.

When the board opened the floor for comments from the public, Maurice Brown expressed concern about the osmosis process. He said he thought the county should continue to draw its water supply entirely from the Peace River rather than rely on reverse osmosis plants that

would draw from deep wells to serve the east side of the Peace River.

"The more water you use out of the river that's available, the better off everyone's going to be — agriculture, industry and residential," he said.

Former County Commissioner Ed Johnson said he supported the county's original plan for using water from the Peace River/Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority because the costs were known.

"Seems like we're leaving the known and going to the unknown," he said. He said he was opposed to accepting either bid. "I'm not sure that either bid really totally covers the scope of work that you are attempting to buy."

Another former county commissioner, Bob Allen, also objected to both bids.

"This bid (the recommended bid) to me has a smell," he said. He said he, too, thought both bids ought to be rejected.

At the conclusion of the question period, Altman made a motion to award the contract to Cardinal Contractors.

Commissioner Terry Welles seconded the motion. At the vote, Garner joined Altman and Welles to make a majority. Hill and Neads dissented.